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ABSTRACT

Speed reading is an issue of how fast a person can comprehend rather than how fast he can read. Research and experience have shown that speed reading can be taught and that the need for the skill is tremendous. The first challenge of the 70's is to enlighten school administrators and parents to the important need of teaching speed reading skills. The key factors to success in teaching these skills are (1) a great deal of positive reinforcement at every step of learning, (2) a positive and reassuring attitude on the part of the teacher, and (3) the teacher's intellectual understanding of the skill and ability to perform the skill himself. To overcome the problem of maintaining the skill, visual reading should be taught in the seventh or eighth grade, and content teachers should know the new reading techniques so that they can encourage students to employ them in daily reading. Students should also be taught to evaluate reading materials so that time allotments can be made for flexible reading. The second challenge of the 70's is the need for more research on visual reading, on new methods of testing and measuring, and on more effective methods of teaching the skills. References are included. (AW)

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Speeded Reading for the 70's

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Looking back at the 60's should give us some clue as to the challenges that lie ahead for us in the 70's. Speedreading was a large issue and a great deal of controversy was generated about whether or not "it" could be done, "it" meaning reading at rates over 1000 or 1200 or 2000 words per minute. Certainly this is no longer a question for debate: there is simply too much evidence that shows that people can be taught to read faster. But from this controversy hopefully the 60's have taught us that to speak of a single reading rate is ridiculous, and to define reading by rat is absurd. Today, in 1971, we should have enough perspective to sift out the developments of worth and to make certain that every effort is being made to implement them

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where they are needed. We certainly have had enough experience to also know where many of our future areas of research and development need be. I intend to give a brief glance at the 60's, discuss the most important techniques which were developed, and make some proposals for the balance of the 70's.

Certainly the very meaning of the word reading is changing: it has changed from being the definition of processing individual words to a process of gaining sense from a set of words without necessarily processing each individual word. This was most likely a result of the rate controversy which was never settled but at least quieted down. Perhaps the rate controversy is not so much a matter of dispute over how fast a person can read as it is how fast a person can comprehend. Everyone knows that speed without comprehension is not reading and is meaningless, yet no one seems to give a solid and workable definition for comprehension. Thus the average person can scan a column of names in a telephone book looking for a certain party and find that name at a phenomenal rate. Is this reading? Is this comprehending? Certainly it is viewing and processing all of the words in order to reject unwanted information until the goal name is found. No one should advocate this scanning process for a serious reading of material to be studied, but perhaps it should not be so lightly dismissed.

In a recent edition of the Journal of Reading we are taught "How to Debunk Numbers." Sidney Rauch (5) states that he can provide a large number of sports-minded junior and senior high school students who can "read" a Sports Illustrated article at extraordinary rates which he "debunks" by explaining

that: "These youngsters bring such a wealth of information to the topic as a result of daily reading of sports pages, television programs and conversations with friends, that they don't have to go beyond the first paragraph to discuss the article intelligently." He goes on to state that he dreads what would happen if they read their math problems this way. Now he apparently doesn't understand visual reading or really how to develop the skill, but he does seem to unwittingly understand a good deal about background information. Having a large background in a certain area should certainly significantly affect your speed and especially your reading techniques. To debunk speed because of a person's background information is highly ironic: what needs debunking is the method of reading which taught him to read everything at the same speed, whether it was a Sports Illustrated article or a math text book, irrelevant of his background knowledge.

If to read "fairly" means to come to the material with no prior knowledge, then nothing can be read. You cannot read unless you already know the words, and the better you know the words the faster you can, or should be able, to read them. And at last the reading world seems to be better prepared to deal with meanings and sense and comprehending rather than purposeless rate and meaningless word-by-word processing.

Today, surely we know that speeded reading can be done, whether that means that we can teach most people to double their speed, or triple it, or whether it means to achieve rates of several thousands of words per minute. At least we know through a fair amount of research and a great deal of experience that we can make a statistically significant increase in rate. It

would be far wiser to spread the knowledge of what we know we can do and leave any quibbling about high rates to research situations.

With the knowledge that speed reading can be taught, we should have also learned through the 60's that the need for the skill is tremendous. This is surely reflected in the tremendous numbers of persons flocking to commercial reading schools and the increasing numbers of such courses being offered in our colleges and universities. The formal training of reading is left off so early in the schools and so much is left untaught. Students seem to have never been taught to read in a method any more advanced than that which is taught up to and through the sixth grade. If they have an enlightened English teacher she might teach them the value of previewing; another teacher might teach them some study techniques other than just reading the page the same way that they would a magazine. Learning how to set a purpose in reading, how to increase your rates, how to adjust your rates to meet your purpose in different materials, how to be flexible, all of these skills are eminently teachable and need to be taught. And studying, which is a logical extension of reading, is never taught in our schools. Isn't it amazing that we go to school to learn and yet we never learn how to learn? We have the knowledge, we have the methods, yet there are still so many schools without these courses and not nearly enough trained personnel to even begin handling the situation. This must be the first challenge of the 70's: simply enlightening the school administrators and parents to this important need, training our teachers to be able to fulfill it, and not neglecting the important aspect of making our future teachers in our schools of education aware of the situation.

What is needed to teach speeded reading? Primarily a well-trained instructor and a few hundred dollars of paperback books. To review the process itself, what happens as we train a fast reader is very easy to understand. Appreciating the training of the reader is quite similar to understanding what happens when a person goes blind. The blind person hears exactly the same sounds as the person who can hear, yet he can discern more information from what he hears. Thus it is with the fast and the slow reader: the slow reader can also scan over a page, but he cannot discern as much information from what he sees and finds it impossible to understand how the trained or naturally fast reader can perceive so quickly. The training process is also simple to understand: as the blind man has learned to hear perceptively by not being able to depend on his sight, so the reader is trained to read visually by not being allowed to depend on inner speech. By training the reader through high speed drills, he goes much faster than he can possibly hear all of the words and thus begins to learn to discern more from what he has seen.

Evelyn Wood's popularization of the hand as a pacer is ingenious. It is so eminently flexible and of course it is always available--and it costs nothing. Furthermore, more than one person has cited the idea that it possibly acts as a replacement for inner speech, one motor activity being substituted for another. (2) With this "equipment" the development of speed is relatively easy: using the hand to pace your eyes down the page, the student must learn to drill at rates far in excess of those at which he has a lot of understanding (which at a slow rate comes through inner speech as well as visual perception). He must drill with very limited comprehension in order to build up confidence in his ability to perceive information visually at higher rates of speed.

We have found that the key factors to success in teaching this skill are a great deal of positive reinforcement at every step of learning this skill, and a very positive and reassuring attitude on the part of the teacher. We find that the teacher is most important: a dynamic, well-trained teacher does well in teaching this skill. And the teacher must be able to perform the skill as well. I'm constantly alarmed at the number of "reading" teachers who wish to teach this skill without ever taking the course or experiencing learning it. Anyone who thinks that an intellectual understanding of the skill is sufficient to teach it will be in for a rude shock.

If we know how to develop speed and efficiency in reading, what will the new challenges of the 70's be in addition to instituting the new techniques and meeting the current needs? Much research needs to be done in "visual" reading. The term itself needs to be carefully defined, does it imply totally visual perception? Do we, can we, or should we even try to eliminate inner speech? We need to explore new methods of testing and measuring to measure and test the new things that are happening in these days when we are doing things which have exceeded physiological limits.

In our experience teaching hundreds of thousands of persons to read faster, we find that one of the problems is maintenance of the skills. While extensive research by the Grudin/Appel/Haley Research Corporation (3) has shown that a majority retain a significant increase, there is room for much more work in this area. We train readers who always read and they should continue to improve, as someone who continues to type regularly always improves.

But teaching visual reading is not unlike teaching a foreign language: it is much more comfortable to express yourself in your own tongue, or read the "old" way, and unless you keep using it it will get very rusty. This suggests that we should begin teaching it at a much earlier age--possibly beginning in the seventh or eighth grade, and the students' other teachers should be taught the new reading techniques so that they can encourage them to employ them in their daily reading. Certainly the habits would become more firmly engrained in this way than if we begin by teaching adults who are already confirmed word-by-word readers.

Another challenge lies in teaching "time" and "value." C. N. Parkinson (4) states that work will expand to fill the amount of time available. I suspect that reading rates do the same thing: they slow down to fill the time available. If people truly desire to read faster, because they really want to read more, then they will probably have to begin to learn how to evaluate what they read and what they want to read. Beginning with their own lifetime, they must begin to decide which books are worth reading, because they will never even make a dent on all of the books published. This is a question of values which must be taught beginning at an early age. When people begin to realize that time is one of the few things that they cannot buy, and that it is so limited, then they can begin to make evaluative choices. Once value has been placed on reading material, then a time allotment can be made and the reader can decide how much of his time the book or material is worth. Only through setting and maintaining a time goal will he be able to maintain his faster reading rates. We find it is relatively easy to train someone to set

a proper time goal and achieve it in the classroom, but we must reach out and learn how to teach him to do this for himself for a lifetime.

There is certainly room for exploration of rapid reading teaching techniques to other reading problems. The techniques which Evelyn Wood popularized are not dissimilar to those which Jeanne Chall (1) advocates for teaching reading, in that they initially emphasize code rather than meaning. We have had some successes in using our techniques with retarded and handicapped readers, and this should be explored more thoroughly.

Thus for the 70's we need to meet first of all the enormous challenge of introducing into our schools what we already know, we need to do further work and research to find out how to improve our teaching so that our students can continue to improve and use their new techniques throughout their life, not only reading faster but reading better.

In 1962 Dr. Russell Stauffer (6) pleaded at the annual education conference at the University of Delaware whose theme was "Speed Reading: Practices and Procedures" that:

> Needed among professionals are improved communications, the avoidance of fixed opinions based on inconclusive evidence, and open-mindedness by those who have vested interests. This is not the time for sniping and snapping but for more and better research. We must decide whether or not literate man is capable of reading faster than he can talk, faster than he can cleverly assemble ideas by skipping and snatching, and whether or not he can read at a rate that is as fast as his ability to think."

Today we know that such fast reading can be done. Now in the interest of sharing our knowledge there is still the need among us for improved communications and open-mindedness and most of all a concerted all-out effort to proselytize and bring our developments to our fellow readers.

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